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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: THE SHIFTING POLITICAL GROUNDS OF NORTHEAST HUNGARY

Classified By: Political Counselor Paul C. O'Friel
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. The political ground is shifting in northeast Hungary, a former Socialist stronghold. Support for center-right Fidesz has grown significantly, and its politicians confidently predict a major victory in next April's national elections. Negative stereotypes and perceptions of Roma criminality have fed support for the far-right Jobbik party, however. Some local Fidesz leaders dismiss any threat posed by Jobbik. Others, though, are not so sure, and believe that Jobbik may prove dangerous to Fidesz's legislative agenda should the far right gain sufficient seats in Parliament. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) A recent visit to the Miskolc region of northeast Hungary underscored just how much the political ground has shifted in what was a one-time a Socialist Party (MSzP) stronghold. In its heyday during the Communist period, Miskolc -- Hungary's third largest city -- and its surrounding area was a center of heavy industry. Many Roma flocked to the region to find jobs in the mines and mills. The years since 1989 have not been kind, however. The factories have closed, and unemployment has skyrocketed, especially among the Roma community, where it hovers in some places close to 90 percent.

ECONOMIC WOES PRODUCE POLITICAL CHANGE

¶3. (SBU) The previously solid support for the Socialist party has begun to crumble. A snapshot of the voting statistics in the village of Sajoszentpeter provides a telling story. In the 2006 national elections, out of 6194 voters who turned out, some 64 percent cast their vote for MSzP, 27 percent backed center-right Fidesz, and 3 percent supported MIEP, a far-right extremist party. In the June 2009 EU Parliamentary elections (which traditionally have a lesser turn-out) the percentage of MSzP voters declined to 27 percent, Fidesz saw a significant gain of 42 percent, while Jobbik, the far-right successor to MIEP, polled 22 percent -- nearly matching the percentage of votes cast for the once-dominant MSzP.

¶4. (C) Conversations with local politicians and everyday voters confirmed the trend. Dr. Peter Farago, the Socialist mayor of Sajoszentpeter, was one of MSzP's founders and has been a member of Parliament since 1994. He is brutally frank about MSzP's chances in next April's national elections: "We're going to lose." According to Farago, the Socialists are still paying the price for former Prime Minister Gyurcsany's leaked 2006 Lake Balaton speech to party faithful, in which Gyurcsany admitted to fiddling with economic figures in order to win the election. "We still haven't recovered our credibility," Farago glumly admitted.

¶5. (C) Farago is focused on securing his base in Sajoszentpeter, where he has served as mayor for the last

three years. He has succeeded in obtaining EU/national development assistance and has installed new sidewalks, parks, and flower beds. While resigned to his party's defeat at the national level, the highly popular mayor appears secure in his sinecure.

ROMA - A "LOST GENERATION" AFTER 1989

¶6. (C) Asked about the Roma community, Farago observed that they were the "losers in regime change." Large scale unemployment has caused some Roma to turn to crime and drugs.

The perception of rising Roma criminality in turn has spurred the growth of Jobbik, whom Farago dismisses as "fascists." "They're no different from the (1940's era) Nyilasok; they even wear the same uniforms." Nonetheless, he commented ruefully "even though people don't want to admit it, a lot of them support Jobbik."

¶7. (C) A local Roma community leader, Laszlo Szilardi, separately echoed Farago's analysis. In 1982, he said, 82 percent of Roma men in the Miskolc area had a job. Regime change in 1989 brought "total chaos" when thousands of workers were let go due to restructuring and privatization. Twenty years later, chronic unemployment, deep poverty, and a welfare-based culture have produced a "lost generation." Some Roma had turned to crime, Szilardi admitted, fueling widely held stereotypes and the perception of insecurity that fed the rise of Jobbik and put the Roma community in a difficult situation. Szilardi argued that the only solution was a comprehensive program to address the root issues of education and employment. "We have to mobilize," he said,

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while recognizing that the Roma community remained disorganized and divided, and still had not found its political voice.

FIDESZ CONFIDENT OF EASY VICTORY

¶8. (C) Fidesz politician Dr. Robert Repassy is clearly confident about MSzP's anticipated defeat in next April's elections. The Socialists, he said, were leaderless. "Aside from (former Prime Minister) Gyurcsany, no one is in the same weight class as (Fidesz party leader) Orban." Repassy distanced himself from the anti-Semitic and homophobic remarks of local Fidesz mayor Oszkar Molnar, whom he dismissed "as an idiot who does not represent the party." Repassy admitted, however, that Molnar's comments reflected badly on Fidesz, and claimed that moves were underway to discipline him. Repassy downplayed any threat to Fidesz from Jobbik.

I KNOW I SHOULDN'T VOTE FOR JOBBIK, BUT...

¶9. (SBU) A sample of the opinion of local farmers indicated that at least some voters are looking to Jobbik as an alternative to both MSzP and Fidesz. The agricultural community around Miskolc suffered shocks, as well, after ¶1989. Former markets in Russia disappeared and local producers find themselves unable to compete with cheaper imported products that have flooded omni-present large chain stores, such as Tesco and Auchan. Hungarian goods have been forced off the shelves, they complain, pointing to the lack of any coherent government agricultural policy to protect local farmers. Economic dislocation and perceptions of insecurity have fed support for Jobbik. One young farmer claimed, "The majority of people here support Jobbik." An older, retired railroad engineer -- and ex-Communist, living on a monthly pension equivalent to \$400 said, "I know in my head I shouldn't vote for them, but my heart tells me a different story."

¶10. (C) COMMENT. A subsequent conversation with another

Miskolc-based Fidesz representative, Dr. Ildiko Pelcz Gall, showed not everyone is as sanguine as Repassy. Pelcz Gall, who is one of five Parliamentary deputy speakers, called Jobbik "dangerous," and expressed fears that the far right, should it gain sufficient seats in Parliament in next April's elections, could undermine Fidesz's legislative agenda. As Hungary's political landscape reshapes itself, the open question next April is to what degree voters in Miskolc and other regions will listen to their heart over their head when it comes to Jobbik.

LEVINE